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The polish horizon in education - facts and fiction

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to assess the transformation of the education system in Poland in the last 25 years, particularly with the discussion of the National Qualifications Framework. During this period there were introduced three bills on higher education in years 1990-2005-2011. The last two follow European standards of education. In the past three years, work of the Ministry of Higher Education has been accelerated. The legislator produced 101 further regulations and notices until the end of 2013. The Ministry's website contains 37 further projects about to change some regulations until now. However the nightmare of the Polish scientists is the National Qualifications Framework.

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1.1 The power of tradition

The ideas of higher education, since its institutionalized foundation in the Middle Ages until now, have been based on cognitive and impractical values. Medieval Europe used these values to build ideas of teaching and learning aided by values like freedom, autonomy, truth, and mutual respect. These values were accompanied by one more value that is often forgotten – full

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openness of every university. Such an approach enabled free development of the universities as well as exchange of findings and information resulting from the research carried out at individual schools.

These ideas put together brought success to schools and researchers, but it also meant selection of those who wished to study. As a result, a university was a research unit, but it offered its services only to a limited group of students. Consequently, certain methods of teaching and doing research were established. This specific relation, known today as a master – student relation, was a highly individualized cooperation relationship. This type of relations followed by the highest possible moral and work standards constituted a scientific and moral trademark of a university. Elitism of knowledge was paired with elitism of access.

1.2 The potential of modernity

Exclusiveness of education that gave a firm basis for self-development was based on principles of individualism. A student was guided by independent decisions in choices of subjects and teachers, being a consequence of individual interests. Such approach to studying should not be considered irrational. The educational system was organized in a way that even when a student joined a technical university in order to study in specialist, technical field, he could still broaden his or her interests directly in his/her own college, or at a university which made it possible for each student to acquire deeper human knowledge.

The early twentieth century brought along profound social changes caused by both world conflicts and military races. After the Second World War a technological race of the countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain took place. Economic and, in consequence, technical and military imbalance resulted in an educational majority of one of the sides. Knowledge kept its status, although its character changed. The elitism of humanistic knowledge was driven by the egalitarianism of technical abilities (in the West).

The geopolitical change imposed as a result of the Yalta arrangements pitched the so far homogeneous education system in Europe. That is why the Second World War constitutes an important dividing line in the approach to the obvious until now issues associated with the functioning of a university. One of the most important matters was autonomy. A considerable fragment of Europe became subordinated to the communist ideology, which meant serious changes in the status of universities and their staff. This resulted in an imposition of a direction for the conducted research and didactics. As a matter of fact, these changes were much wider and deeper since education became subordinated to the ideology of the communist party. In 1951 a new law on higher education institutions was enforced, which established a new institutional and organizational model in Poland. As a result, the learning was divided into four levels: higher education institutions, the Polish Academy of Sciences, departmental institutes, and science and technology associations (Hejnicka-Bezwińska, p. 36).

As a result of the dominance of the ideology of scientific work over the philosophy of such a work, many outstanding but non-conforming scientists lost their university positions. Not only people were eliminated, but “institutions and ideas as well. Crime could also be committed on the system of values. Such were the needs of the system. However, the crisis of arts and limitations of humanism was of help” (Hübner, p. 227). The crisis that was triggered, naturally, by the very dominating system of mass culture which “destroyed local values”, caused “the family world to break up, faith was at the state of crisis. (...) On one hand, the system had a great destructive power but it was short of structural abilities not only in the economic sphere, but also in science”.

Universities surrendered to having certain departments closed, which included theological departments. Others were transformed into new colleges. The Jagiellonian University may be taken as a typical example of the situation in those times. Its agricultural, medical and physical education departments were used to serve as a basis for creating new higher education institutions. Some other departments were closed while enrollment to others was canceled for a dozen of years. This happened to philosophy, pedagogy, psychology and sociology departments. Finally, the number of students who could be admitted was limited, and its increase or further reduction depended on the decision of the party executive committee. In other words, decisions on important, and often sensitive issues of higher education and broadly understood culture, were given an ideological character.

In the mid-fifties the situation got slightly better, although it never achieved full stability and autonomy available to colleges in Western Europe or the USA. The centralization of culture extended on higher education, too. As a result, during all those years higher education was subjected to party-political pressures and control. Therefore there were hopes that the political-economic turn of the late 80s of the 20th century would finally put an end to this type of guidance and make way for re-establishing of the university, basing on the well-known patterns and traditions of the pre-war system as well as answering the needs of the new century.

1.3 Mission or remission?

In the late 1980s, on the occasion of the nine-hundredth anniversary of the University of Bologna (1988), rectors of European universities, including Warsaw University, signed the Bologna Charter (18.09.1988). This document links tradition with the present by emphasizing the importance of such academic values as tolerance, respect, openness and assigning universities the central role in the social and cultural life of European countries. Moreover, an obligation to create a common system of education in Europe, based on principles formulated in the Magna Charta Universitatum, was expressed there. In its "Fundamental Principles" we can find a confirmation of the role and place of the university in the culture of the "old" continent expressed by four principles: a) autonomy: "research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of political authority and economic power"; b) bond of science and didactics: "Teaching and research in universities must be inseparable"; c) tolerance: "a university is an ideal meeting-place for teachers capable of imparting their knowledge (...) and for students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge"; d) trust: "a university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition; its constant care is to attain universal knowledge; to fulfill its vocation it transcends geographical and political frontiers, and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other" (http://www.magna-charta.org/library/userfiles/file/mc_english.pdf). These principles expressed obvious beliefs as they had been carried out in Europe for the past thousand years, and yet, it was necessary to recall them since they had been repeatedly violated in the 20th century.

The declarations that followed confirmed this fact, broadening some of the issues. Eleven years later, in 1999, 29 ministers of higher education of European countries signed the Bologna Declaration (19.06.1999) which expresses the will to create the European Higher Education Area. All these declarations resulted in activities aimed at unifying the educational systems of individual countries. There were also a few communiques and declarations (Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, London 2007, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009, Budapest-Vienna 2010) which stated that Europe needed strong universities that would help to build the "European science society" (http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/GLASGOWdeclaration_FINAL_PO.1117550611801.pdf).

We can acknowledge that the Magna Charta Universitatum is the answer to the never asked question: why is the "knowledge society" important. "The future of the mankind (...) depends largely on the cultural, scientific and technical development, whereas this development is an effect of the action taken at community centers, the knowledge and researches, so as universities. A crowning of the work was the Budapest-Vienna Declaration, which announced the appointment of the "European Higher Education Area".

The Bologna process has created space for higher education, although probably we will have to wait longer for the building of a science society. Nevertheless, the Bolognese process has set out a general framework of action without interfering with detailed issues of education in individual countries. And thus the signature of the Declaration does not mean any loss of educational autonomy of each of the countries participating in the process, because it allows individual solutions.

All these principles and declarations concerning the institution of the university instil optimism. They draw a future in which restrictions of reforms of Napoleon and Humboldt will be overcome by including them in the structure of the education, applying needs of the present. It is a great challenge and it is possible to recognize the already implemented changes as an answer to the current needs. One might state that the Bolognese process combines the French and German models of education. A bachelor's degree course "through its one directionality" belongs to the first one, while an undergraduate course leading to a master's degree comprising of „theoretical part, methodological part and a part aimed at developing practical skills" belongs to the second model (K. Sauerland, 36). The Bologna process was commenced in the sphere of organizations and the European network of higher education institutions is a fact. Structural changes, which in themselves should be regarded as positive, were carried out too mechanically, and as a consequence they adversely affected the level of teaching. Analyzing the implemented changes in Poland will be particularly interesting.

The fundamental changes concerned the quality of teaching students, referring to the National Qualification Framework (NQF). In Poland, they were introduced on the 18th March 2011 and came into force as of 1st October 2011. The NQF program, while worthy in its assumptions, has caused and still is causing a headache to university teachers in Poland, gaining extremely varying opinions. The following remarks are supposed to present the "Polish way" of carrying out the program, which – for obvious organizational reasons (central management) – affects the entire system of higher education in our country. As exponents of the attitude towards the NQF we take the analyses of two scientists from the AGH-University of Science and Technology, who analyzed the program from a theoretical and empirical point of view, in two aspects: negative and positive.

The authors, Ryszard Tadeusiewicz and Antoni Ligęza, state that from the very beginning the NQF was a "real nightmare that affected the entire higher education and caused (...) a huge disruption in the teaching process in all Polish colleges. The implementation of these rules cost a massive amount of work of highly qualified academic teachers from universities given to an undertaking that proved to be as much ill-considered, as pointless" (Tadeusiewicz, Ligęza, 2).

In their report, the authors raise some valid questions: what was the reason for applying the NQF, what purpose it is supposed to serve, what are the potential profits and losses resulting from its implementation. In other words, they carry out an academic account. It is worthwhile adding that there has been no ministerial account of the reform to this day. The general evaluation falls out very badly, not to say crushingly - and what is more both in the technical, as well as financial aspect. Still, we cannot claim that the implementation of the NQF was the

requirement of the European Union, since only two countries implemented it: Norway and Poland. Three other countries - France, Germany and Great Britain - had their own NQF. So what did the NQF basics mean?

The authors took into consideration only their own university, comprising of 16 departments. A digital curriculum has some statistics available: "For example, each department created from 189 to 1398 descriptions of modules of teaching. Every description of a module consists of 14 identification fields, descriptions of effects of educating (...), matrix of effects of teaching (...), description of contents of teaching, estimating the workload of the student and balance of ECTS points, description of the method of appointing the final evaluation, description of preliminary and additional requirements, list of recommended literature and resources, additional information" (Tadeusiewicz, Ligęza, p. 9). As it appears from these statistics 10 860 descriptions of modules have been prepared. Since writing up of each module took up to 20 hours, it sums up to a massive 200.000 man-hours total. Estimating the cost of one man-hour as PLN 40 (without substantial supplementary costs), it is PLN 8 million (approx. 2 million Euro) per one college.

The conclusion in the wider scale is indeed paralyzing: "at the national level it gives an estimated total (with reference to public colleges) of one billion Polish zloty" (Tadeusiewicz, Ligęza, p. 9).

And so question arises: has anything changed in the process of conducting classes or verifying students' knowledge? The answer regarding the evaluation of knowledge and skills is explicit: nothing. The teaching process and the process of examining remained unchanged. So have any changes taken place with reference to competencies? The reply is also negative. The ministry did not provide for any mechanisms of verification and evaluation of social competencies, and in fact the university cannot do it on its own. Consequently, costs may multiply. As the authors point out, a survey on the NQF identified various negative opinions and criticism from different sources. Until the moment of publication of their report, there had been no positive assessments. Let us also hope that the situation of KRK will not replicate the legal situation of the act on higher education.

After the political changes in 1989, on 12th September 1990 an act on higher education came into force. Fifteen years later it was replaced with a new statute "Law on higher education" (27th July 2005). Six years passed and there was another change of law. As can be seen, the time between introducing new laws has shortened. In the last three years the pace at which the Ministry of Science and Higher Education conducts legislative work has considerably accelerated: up till today 101 further regulations and announcements have been introduced, in which the legislator expressed the will of even more detailed regulation of different issues. Currently, on the Ministry's website there have been 37 further draft amendments published (Tadeusiewicz, Ligęza). It is worthy to note that the Polish Ministry of Higher Education is going to add further 150 regulations this year only).

All these facts demonstrate problems that administrative personnel and academic staff have to deal with at Polish universities. These facts rise anxieties regarding future actions of ministerial committees. Above all, however, these undesired developments also show the shaken relations and a total lack of balance between the NQF goals and the reality? On one hand, there is a lot of talk about the mission of the university in the contemporary world, and on the other - about the challenges of this world. The latter immediately undermine the ideal of a university and its mission because it implements an element of entrepreneurship at universities, which converts a higher education institution into a business venture. Thus, instead of the mission accepted by the ministry and carried out by a higher education institution we are dealing with a remission of the morbidity, triggered by the real socialism. This only means continuing the process of decay of

traditional values associated with education, knowledge acquisition, research conduct - that is, all the elements that form the European humanistic tradition.

Three missions: knowledge, skill and competence express significant features of university education throughout its history, from the cognitive model of the Greeks to the enterprise model of the present. The theory, understood as a deep cognitive access, has been currently subordinated to the pragmatics of technologized and economized life. Finding a balanced model, in which none of the missions will be developed at the cost of another, seems unattainable at the moment. These three missions are similar to the three Greek Graces of European education. Let us not decide which is "Splendor" (Aglaia), which "Mirth" (Euphrosyne) and which "Good Cheer" (Thalia). However, we fear to ask whether, by any chance, there was some "local" grace that participated in the implementation of changes to Polish higher education. And if it did, which name should we call her?

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